

SURREALISTIC ART OBJECTS

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Palindromic poems, by nature, are suggestive. I am not referring to debase dung, nudes abed, or the other exotic bits of imagery that conveniently lend themselves to palindromization. Palindromic poems are self-suggestive. Every word added onto or inserted into a palindromic poem suggests other words in reverse, and these words, when assimilated into the palindrome, suggest additional words. As long as some of these suggested words are acceptable to the constructor, the cycle can repeat indefinitely, producing a palindrome of considerable length. (It is much easier to initiate and expand a palindrome than it is to neatly and effectively curtail one.) An unrestrained palindrome will also suggest its own grammar and semantics. Depending how you look at it, such a palindrome will appear to be the ultimate vers libre or, more probably, nonsensical gibberish.

The greatest problem faced by the palindromic poet is that of subjugating and controlling such nonsense, creating a form that is artful, poetic. There are many approaches to this problem. Some constructors feel it is sufficient for the words of a palindrome to have a special tone and texture, without any real meaning. Here is an example of such a palindrome, a sleepy meander that wrote itself in my head one night:

So set in glee, fine model baffles, lives on, or ...
Keen knees seen.
Knee, Kronos-evil, self-fabled omen I feel,
G'nite...S.O.S.

Other constructors try to develop a theme by incorporating words with related meanings. Howard W. Bergerson does this in his poem "The Faded Bloomers' Rhapsody" from his book Palindromes and Anagrams (Dover, 1973), a pleasantly nonsensical palindrome that contains a number of flower-words: petal, iris, rose, goldenrod, amaryllis ... This approach can also be observed in J. A. Lindon's similarly-nonsensical "agnized ode" which appeared in the November 1972 Word Ways and included the related theme-words gypsy, vendetta, zingaro, gitano (where were the Romanies?), as well as a vulcanian sub-theme (volcano, lava, peperino, Stromboli). Palindromes similar to these can be called "motif palindromes". The following poem can be taken as an example of a motif palindrome or an excuse to have a snack:

DELICATESSEN

O desired, unwon kisser!
Go to him, alas,
nubile Danielle:

Some sot cur
from a jar
of bagel batter
(germane mix).

Old locks.

A can:

It's a periled deli repast in a cask:

Cold lox.

I, men,
am regrettable?
Gab for a jam
or fructose Moselle
in a deli-bun salami,
hot ogress I know nude:
Rise! Do!

If this approach were taken to its extreme, an "ideal" motif palindrome would be one in which fully half of the letters appeared in theme-words. Here is an attempt at composing an "ideal" motif palindrome:

THE EASTERN EMPERORS' FOOD COMPETITION

Now may Shah Sid, a pasha, jar a ham.
No vises mar hoar, ah Pharaoh Ramses IV.
On, maharajahs!

A padishah's yam won.

Obviously, this poem is far from "ideal". It does not scan, and a closer look at the texture of the words elicits a verdict of ugliness. This is because I imposed the one-half theme-words requirement on top of the already stringent palindromic requirements. In fact, any additionally imposed requirement (including rhyme scheme or syllabic arrangement) tends to muddy up a naturally free-flowing palindrome.

The motif approach is only one way the palindromist can attempt to create poetry. I suggest a more obvious approach: simply have the damn things make sense. This has long been dismissed as a far-fetched dream, forbiddingly time-consuming if not absolutely impossible. However, since "Edna Waterfall", a nearly-coherent, 1034-word piece of eroto-palindromic poetry, was published in Dmitri Borgmann's Beyond Language (Scribner's, 1967), the prospect of composing palindromes that exhibit clarity of thought has seemed like less of a fantasy.

It is time that several long-held misconceptions be dealt with. The first is the belief that the English language contains few words which

can be included in palindromes. Not so! If a concordance to the palindromes in Bergerson's previously-mentioned book were written, we would have a very large vocabulary to work with (as well as an extremely useful tool). Furthermore, if one turns to any page at random in, say, the Merriam-Webster Pocket Dictionary, the number of words one will observe that can be fit into some sort of a sentence when spelled backwards is surprising. There is no dearth of palindromizable words. For any chosen motif, there will be a number of suitable theme-words with palindromic potential.

Another misconception is the belief that the substance of palindromic poetry is governed by some satanic, immutable force. This goes back to the fact that the reversal of every word introduced into a palindrome suggests other words that can be included. You cannot have a spool without loops, so to speak. Some feel that a palindrome will dictate certain words that must be included. As I have said throughout this article, the palindrome does not dictate, it suggests. Some say that incoherent elements in palindromes are the work of the Devil. I disagree. They are the work of the palindromist, for the palindromist has absolute control over every word included at every stage of construction. If a word or phrase one wishes to include in a palindrome suggests an infelicitous meaning when it is reversed at a point equidistant from the center of the palindrome, simply replace it, alter it, or discard it. This can always be done. There is no reason a palindrome reader should have to choke on a phrase like "one-erg saw" because the palindromist wanted to use "was green". In other words, if you don't find your cigar too tragic, you can replace it with a stogie I got, say, or perhaps switch to a pipe.

Why has this not been done more extensively? Why, as a rule, do palindromes read so stiffly? One reason is a combination of laziness and the exigencies of the temporal flow: few palindromists have either the time or inclination to wade through dictionaries, thesauruses, and reverse-alphabet word lists seeking the best word. Many times such a search would end in failure and the palindrome would have to be re-worked entirely.

Another reason palindromes often read stiffly is that some words and phrases are so compelling that the palindromist feels their inclusion justifies and compensates for the awkward reverse meaning:

FIRE SONG

Pope, Avon's as red now (flow on, Avon)
 As a cigaret's orangish-crimson fire.
 Song, no solo song, no serif, no smirch.
 "Sign a roster?" a GI Casanova (no wolf) wonders,
 As novae pop.

The first two lines of "Fire Song" remind me of the fiery imagery of Alexander Pope. Things start to fall apart in the third line, but it still exhibits some poetic qualities. The fourth line is an abomination,

and a final fire-image in the last line fails to save the poem as a whole. Yet the excellent first two lines could not exist if it were not for the drivel that follows them.

Is there no hope? Howard W. Bergerson has stated that clarity is a virtue which must be sacrificed in order to create high-priority spectacles. Mr. Bergerson's palindromically incredible but semantically obscure word usage would seem to bear this out. Can his statement be turned around? By forgoing the astounding verbal pyrotechnics and sticking to short, simple words, does clarity become attainable? Obscure poems involving relatively simple word usage such as Humbert Phillips' "Mood's Mode" in Bergerson's book, or J. A. Lindon's "Dames Pale Lapse Mad" in the November 1972 Word Ways, indicate that obfuscation must indeed be omnipresent in palindromic poetry. My own experiments have shown otherwise:

STOMACH DISTRESS

Cite me one suicide:
Melba desserts (red)
Nullify me.
Tall, ill,
Ate my fill
Under stress.
Ed, able medic,
I use no emetic.

Earlier it was stated that attempts to impose structural poetic qualities on palindromes tend to muddy them up. The astute reader may have noticed that all the double lines in the poem above were at least half-rhymed. Why is this? Well, that's the form that suggested itself while I was composing the palindrome, and who was I to argue?

The next poem also involves low-priority word usage but shows that such poems can be spectacular in their own way:

ORIGIN OF A TEETOTALER

Sit in a bar, even. On, on, I vow!
One mo'? He mix a twelfth gin fizz?
If night flew, taxi me home now.
O vino, no! Never! A ban it is!

The poem doesn't scan as well as it might, but both couplets rhyme twice and the poem features palindromic line syllabification (10-8-8-10). Once again, this poetic structure suggested itself during the composition of the palindrome.

The reader may notice that all of the palindromes I have included in this article are of the end-to-end variety, and are relatively long. The reason for their length is most obvious. As was pointed out earlier, every word inserted into a nascent palindromic poem suggests

other words, and these in turn suggest many more. Because of this blossoming process, palindromic poems tend to be long. Furthermore, in the long poem a chosen motif can be most fully exploited by the inclusion of a maximum number of theme-words.

Now then. Why are my long palindromes of the end-to-end variety? Line-palindromic poetry, a form in which each line of a long poem is a separate palindrome, has historically been much more common. The chief drawback with line-palindromic poetry is the difficulty of beginning and ending each line neatly. The lines usually come out looking ragged and sounding forced, especially if an attempt is made to include various theme-words. An end-to-end palindrome has to be ended/begun only once, minimizing this difficulty. An advantage line palindromes have over end-to-end poems is that the individual lines can be arranged into the most logical, pleasing order. However, the long, end-to-end palindrome can have a built-in form of its own. The constructor starts in the middle, with a palindromic core in which the main motif is expressed most clearly. He then extends the palindrome by adding onto each end of this core. The main theme expressed in the middle digresses in two opposite directions, and the alert constructor can work up towards a sensible beginning and down towards a sensible end (and the middle becomes the climax of the palindrome).

The palindrome that follows is a five-part anti-war poem based on the flight of a US soldier stationed in Viet Nam, an act of desertion:

RAW WAR
(O Sanities' Reverse, It)

"In red omen--a sniping--I bade murder adieu.
Gore, carnage, be off! On!
O, I save lives, live fore'er,
Flee from radical life of red!"

No!
Pigs--unaware poor troop--won't.
Evade if it reconnoitres.
Edge low, trooper.

O Sanities, reverse it!
In a solo war-evasion a hero tore.
("Hanoi saver! AWOL!")
O Sanities, reverse it in a sore, poor, two-leg desertion!

No!
Certified a 'vet' now, poor trooper, a wan US GI.
Ponder foe? Fill acid armor?
Feel freer of Evil's evil!

Evasion of foe began.
 Race, rogue I dared.
 Rum, Ed! A big nip!
 Insane modernities reverse it in a so raw war.

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

Viz, the bimonthly Names Society newsletter competently edited by Leslie Dunkling of Thames Ditton, Surrey, England, reprinted (November 1973) from the Toronto Sun the following list of grammatical rules originated by Ernest Tucker:

1. Don't use no double negatives
2. Make each pronoun agree with their antecedents
3. Join clauses good, like a conjunction should
4. About them sentence fragments
5. When dangling, watch your participles
6. Verbs has got to agree with their subjects
7. Just between you and I, case is important too
8. Don't write run-on sentences they are hard to read
9. Don't use commas, which aren't important
10. Try to not ever split infinitives
11. It is important to use apostrophe's correctly
12. Proofread your writing to see if you any words out
13. Correct speling is essential

Marshall McLuhan, are you paying attention?

AN EARLY BOOK ON ANAGRAMS

Henry B. Wheatley's Of Anagrams: A Monograph Treating Of Their History From The Earliest Ages To The Present Time, originally published in 1862, has been reprinted by Finch Press (337 E. Huron Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48108) and is available from them for twelve dollars. Dmitri Borgmann, who is familiar with the original work, comments that it is an extremely slender volume, with a small page format; he further reports that a considerable portion of the text is devoted to Latin anagrams rather than English ones. Caveat emptor!